

History/ Fiction: An Intertextual reading of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*

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ABSTRACT

The structural poetics which Gerard Genette bases his theory of intertextuality on focuses its attention on the study of the system, rather than individual works, providing a mapping of the closed system of literature and thus a firm basis for any meaningful analysis of individual works. The major focus of this study is to reveal how Doctorow takes history as the hypo text, combines it with the story of his novel, the hypertext, and employs parody at the same time. To elaborate on how the work is a parody, we can benefit from a new historicist reading of the work. Since we intend to observe the text under the light of Genette's intertextuality, questions to ask are; how can we observe Ragtime as a parole, and attempt to place it back into a system? To what kind of system does Ragtime belong to? Doctorow challenges the reader to question the nature of historical truth. This is observed once we realise the intertextual relationship between the fictive world of his novel and the history of America as it is recorded and documented by historians. At first sight, it appears that he is mainly depicting the spirit of the 'Progressive Era' in the lives of the three representative families. Yet further reading attests to his criticism of any notion of change and progress, especially in the lives of the marginalised and suppressed members of the American society.

Keywords: history; fiction; intertextuality; Ragtime; Gerard Genette.

INTRODUCTION

What happens when the country's myths and ideologies no longer coincide with reality? What occurs when the historical present nullifies both our expectations and our assumptions? ... What takes place when we realise we are individually powerless, and that effective power lies somewhere in the interstices of corporate America, the military, and leadership incapable of leading? (Hendin 2004, p.35)

Intertextuality regards all texts, whether literary or not, as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. The very act of reading itself engages us with a network of textual relations, and it is the job of the reader to disentangle and discover the existing textual relations. The text will then become a locus where different texts are referred to, having meaning only when the textual relations are uncovered and brought to the foreground. Frow introduces the term as follows:

A more general word than 'citation' for this phenomenon of speech (or writing, or images) which refers to other speech (or writing, or images ...) is *intertextuality*. What I mean by this is the range of processes by which a text invokes another, but also the way texts are constituted as such by their relationships with other texts. No text is unique; we could not recognize it if it were. (Frow 2006, p.48)

The origins of intertextuality lie in the seminal work of Ferdinand de Saussure, as his theory of the systematic features of language uncovered the relational nature of meaning. Bakhtin's theory of literature and language also contributed to intertextuality but it is with

Kristeva's attempt at integrating Saussure and Bakhtin's theories on language and literature that intertextuality achieved explicit articulation.

The poststructuralist critics first employed the term *intertextuality* to disrupt earlier notions of objectivity, stability and rationality in favour of subjectivity, instability and uncertainty of meaning. In this regard, Barthes in his famous essay *Death of the Author*, challenged the role of the author as the Father of the text, and helped readers realize that the author can never be the sole originator of his text. Barthes, no longer holding a structuralist stance in this article, was voicing the poststructuralist notion of the impossibility of meaning, since once the major centre of origin, the author, is removed, there will no longer remain a central point to relate all meaning:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (Lodge 2000, p.149)

At exactly this point, plurality begins; the text is no longer confined and restricted to an original point of departure. Rather it is transformed into a space in which various 'voices' are heard, where signs are attributed to infinite number of signifiers, non-privileged over the other; a space where the reader, who is an even more significant figure than the author, must strive to 'disentangle' rather than 'decipher' the text. This plurality of meaning or various voices he refers to are in fact the very intertextual nature of texts which direct readers to new textual relations.

While the critics mentioned above all reflect a characteristically post structural tendency towards texts and the impossibility of meaning, there are theorists who employ intertextuality to argue for critical approaches opposed to the critical uncertainty of Kristeva and Barthes. Michael Riffaterre and Gerard Genette have employed intertextuality to argue for the existence of critical certainty and the possibility of the literary text articulating definite, certain and determined matters. Critics have observed Genette's indebtedness to Kristeva in his book *Palimpsests* but they have mainly applauded his *Palimpsests* for its 'open structuralism' or 'pragmatic reworking of Kristeva' (Orr 2000, p.106) and observed his imitation of Kristeva not as plagiarism but as 'licensed imitation' (Orr 2000, p.107). Hence, intertextuality has been employed by poststructuralist critics to disrupt the possibilities of fixed meaning, while at the same time structuralists have employed it to fix and stabilize meaning.

Literature and culture are inextricably entangled and intertextuality is a useful tool in revealing this complex relation. It must also be mentioned that intertextuality will not always have literary references. It can also be used to reflect a period of history. The present study aims to reveal the intertextual relations between Doctorow's *Ragtime* and the history of America during the early twentieth century. The major aim of the work will be to employ intertextuality in order to reveal Doctorow's intention in citing historical characters and events history, juxtaposing them with the fictive world of his novel.

As a rich source of intertextual connections, Doctorow's novel verges on the border between realism and postmodernism. Genette's structuralist theory of intertextuality appears to be an appropriate means through which *Ragtime* can be considered due to the 'open structuralist' tendency it embodies. To study in detail the intertextual links between the history of the United States during the roaring twenties and the text of the novel, Genette's ideas regarding intertextuality will be employed.

DISCUSSION

According to Genette, literary texts are not original. In other words he believes that literary texts are *paroles* in the Saussurean sense “a series of partially autonomous and unpredictable individual acts; but the consumption of this literature by society is a langue” (Allen 2000, p. 96). While the author derives his elements from the enclosed literary system and arranges and structures them into his text, veiling the work’s relation to the system, it remains the responsibility of the critic to return it to the system, unveiling the relationship between text and system, obscured by the author. So while a post structural reading emphasizes the ambiguity of the relation between text and system or between signifier and signified, the structuralist critic will attempt to situate a text back into its context or system.

The structural poetics which Genette bases his theory of intertextuality on focuses on the study of the system, rather than individual works, providing a mapping of the closed system of literature and thus providing a firm foundation for any meaningful analysis of individual works. In his three related works, *Architext*, *Palimpsest* and *Paratexts*, Genette illustrates how the practice of structuralist poetics can be intertextual. From there, he derives a coherent theory of what he names as ‘transtextuality’, which as Allen states can be interpreted as ‘intertextuality from the view point of structural poetics’ (Allen 2000, p.98).

In the first of the three, *The Architext*, Genette attempts to establish a stable poetics of theme, genre and mode which he states is dependent on the *Architext*, which is the basic, unchanging, (or at least slowly evolving) building blocks which underpin the entire literary system. Yet what remains at stake here is that such a fixed foundation block or *architext* has not yet been achieved. To solve this problem and to save his argument from lapsing into the poststructuralist notion of plurality, Genette introduces another term, *transtextuality* or textual transcendence.

Genette intends to elucidate the (sometimes changing and fluid) relationships which link the text with the architextual network out of which its meaning is produced. This he calls an *open structuralism* because of its aversion to providing a stable and unchanging map of literary elements. Because of the very open nature of this perspective, Genette states that ‘the architext is, then, everywhere- above, beneath, around the text, which spins its web only by hooking it here and there onto that network of architecture’ (Allen 2000, p.100).

Thus transtextuality and architextuality permit an ‘endlessly forming and reforming poetics’ (Allen 2000, p.100) which take as its object not the text but the architext. Consequently, Genette manages to propose a pragmatic structuralism which evades the radical pluralism and instability of Barthes and Kristeva.

TRANSTEXTUALITY

With transtextuality Genette means the textual transcendence of a text, in other words, the relationship between a text and other texts. Transtextuality is the term he employs for intertextuality, in order to differentiate it from the poststructuralist notion of intertextuality (as uncertain and flux). He employs *Architextuality* as one version of transtextuality and then divides it into five more specific categories. He names his first kind of transtextuality as intertextuality by which he means; “a relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts, the actual presence of one text within another.” (Genette 1997, p.1) This includes quotations, plagiarism and allusion, giving a very pragmatic intertextual relationship by which we can determine the specific elements of individual texts.

Whereas the poststructuralist critic considers the text’s relation to the entirety of cultural signification, Genette’s structural intertextuality is a more restricted, structural-

inspired engagement with what it supposes to be a closed or as Allen mentions “semi-autonomous field of literature.” (Allen 2000, p.102) Hence what results is an attempt, unlike that of Barthes’s, to locate the position of texts within a feasible system.

The next term we must refer to is *metatextuality* which is the commentary a text makes upon another text “it unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it.” (Genette 1997, p.4) This is the very practice undertaken by literary criticism and poetics.

Architextuality deals with ‘the reader’s expectations, and thus their reception of a work.’ Architextuality is one of Genette’s five types of transtextuality. Architextuality may refer to the generic, modal, thematic or figurative expectations about texts.

PARATEXTUALITY

This is Genette’s second type of transtextuality. “The paratext, as Genette explains, marks those elements which lie on the threshold of the text and which help to direct and control the reception of a text by its readers” (Allen 2000, p.103). This threshold consists of a *peritext* and an *epitext*. The peritext contains elements such as “titles, chapter titles, prefaces and notes” (Allen 2000, p.103). The epitext contains elements such as “interviews, publicity announcements, reviews by and addressed to critics, private letters and other authorial and editorial discussions- outside of the text in question” (Allen 2000, p.103). The paratext is hence the sum total of the peritext and the epitext. What interests Genette is the transactional nature of the paratext. The paratext, Genette believes, guide the way readers read a text, dealing with matters regarding the text’s existence and establishing the text’s intentions. Genette mentions that the naming of the title of books or their authors can have two functions in controlling the reception of the text; *thematic* and *rhematic*.

Thematic titles refer to the subject of texts while rhematic titles refer to the manner in which texts perform their function. Genette also highlights the significance of paratexts which are *autographic*, by the author, or *allographic*, by someone other than the author. For Genette then, it becomes important what destiny the author intends for his text, to make sure that “the correctness of the authorial (and secondary, of the publisher’s) point of view is the implicit creed and spontaneous ideology of the paratext” (Genette 1997, p.408)

HYPERTEXTUALITY

The major kind of intertextuality in Genette’s transtextuality is Hypertextuality by which he means “any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (Allen 2000. p.108). This hypo-text is in fact what other critics have termed the *inter-text* that is a text that can be identified as the source for the text. Genette is here concerned with generic aspect of literature as a closed system.

In Hypertextuality, Genette is concerned with the intended and self-conscious relation between literary works and their relation to previous works:

Above all, Hypertextuality, as a category of works, is in itself a generic or, more precisely, *transgeneric* architext: I mean a category of texts which wholly encompasses certain canonical (though minor) genres such as pastiche, parody, travesty, and which also touches upon other genres- probably all genres. (Genette 1997, p. 8)

At this point, his Architextuality may appear to be similar to Hypertextuality. However, Allen marks their distinctions as follows;

“The main difference between Hypertextuality and Architextuality is that whilst pastiche, parody, travesty and caricature are essentially and internationally hypertextual, tragedy, comedy, the novel and the lyric are based on the notion of the imitation of generic models rather than specific hypotexts. The meaning of hypertextual works, Genette argues, depends upon the reader’s knowledge of the hypotext which the hypertext either satirically transforms or imitates for the purpose of pastiche” (Allen 2000, p. 109).

The major focus of Genette is how Hypertextuality transforms the hypotext. The aim of the present study is to reveal the intertextuality of Doctorow’s *Ragtime* as the hypertext, based on the hypotext of American history as it has been recorded by historians. The novel will also be observed as a *parole*, and it will be attempted to uncover the *langue* to which the work belongs.

RAGTIME AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Combining narrative forms in his innovative confrontations with the political past as personal as well as public legacy, Doctorow, along with a host of other writers committed to traditions of American realism, uncovered problems that transcend ideologies of conformity or revolt, extending the tradition of the realistic novel (Hendin 2004, p.3). Doctorow transforms history into fiction, via parody. Since we intend to observe the text under the light of Genette’s intertextuality, a major question to ask at this point is; how can we observe *Ragtime* as a *parole*, to what kind of system does *Ragtime* belong?

In *Ragtime*, Doctorow attempts to portray the cultural history of America in the early twentieth century. At the same time, the novel is about the time in which it was composed: ‘The novel clearly chimes with the ‘ragtime revival’ of the 1970s, one which saw Scott Joplin receive a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1976 for his services to American music’ (Whalan 2010, p.190). Doctorow intertwines the fates of three fictional families, each representing a specific class of the American society of the time, with actual historical characters.

The first is the white upper middle-class family consisting of Father, Mother, Mother’s Younger Brother, the Little Boy (the narrator of the events) and Grandfather. This family represents the comfort and ease in the lives of people, brought about by what most historians refer to as ‘the Progressive era’. Reform became the striking concern of America, after leaving behind the strife of the 1980s. At this stage in history, there developed a sense of social awareness for the need of reform as a major phenomenon and for this reason, the period from 1900 to World War 1 came to be known as the Progressive Era (Henretta 2006, p. 597).

However, Doctorow questions the very nature of prosperity attributed to this era, specifically in his portrayal of the next two families who were mostly neglected by historians. This is stressed by the narrator of the novel who reflects the attitude taken by white upper-middle class American families who neglected the existence of the marginalized members of American society when in the early pages of the novel he states: “There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants” (Doctorow 1976, pp.11-12). In fact it is the lives of the two groups of immigrants and Negroes represented by the two families in the story that Doctorow intends to highlight and foreground for the reader.

Immigrants are represented by the family of Tateh, Mameh and their little girl, Jewish immigrants who entered the United States by millions between 1880 and 1920. Upon entering the United States, Tateh becomes a committed democratic socialist but his transformation to a committed capitalist filmmaker reflects the way the United States government channels any attempt at rebellion and resistance. The third family, the most brutally treated by the

American Society, is the Negro family; Coalhouse Walker, his wife Sarah and their baby. Doctorow's depiction of this family is even more tragic. Coalhouse Walker at first sight proves the practicality of the 'Progressive' age. Yet Doctorow unveils the intolerability of a Negro, at the peak of success, by white American society. In fact the connection between the title of the novel and Coalhouse Walker's profession (playing ragtime music on the piano) who dominates mostly the second part of the novel, serves to highlight Doctorow's focus on the lives of the marginalized social groups, often observed as outsiders.

While most historians of the time interpreted this period as that of consensus among most Americans about political issues, Doctorow emphasizes the conflict between different groups of people; between blacks and whites, men and women, capital and labour, revealing the conflicts which have ultimately constructed American history.

This was also the time of the flourishing of multimillionaires such as J.P.Morgan, who controlled 100.000 miles of railroad, amounting to half the country's mileage., John D. Rockefeller, who set up the Standard Oil Company of Ohio and controlled the stock of many other companies, Andrew Carnegie, a steel producer who was making \$40 million a year by 1900 and who sold his steel company to J.P Morgan, the price was \$492,000,000. And all this monopoly of business could never have been carried out without the collaboration of the government and the congress.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

Ragtime was a kind of jazz music that became popular in the America in the early 1900s. The major characteristic of Ragtime music is a special kind of syncopation in which occurs melodic accent between metrical beats. It becomes significant to observe the intention of Doctorow regarding his employment of the term *Ragtime*, its specific reference to music and at the same time, the way it reflects the thematic and the rhematic of the novel. As Moser states: "The novel negatively portrays stagnation in its unfavourable depiction of those unwilling to accept change, while celebrating social transformation and diversity through the use of music as a metaphor" (Moser 2010, p.213).

Like Ragtime music, the novel appears to be a syncopation of both sides; the oppressors and the oppressed (Father, the firemen, J P Morgan, versus Tateh, Coalhouse Walker, Sarah), historical facts versus fiction (historical figures versus fictive figures) and yet just as Ragtime music is syncopated music(the weak beats in the bar are stressed instead of the strong beats), the novel intends to deconstruct the oppositions by focusing our attention on the inferior or lesser paid attention to aspect of the oppositions; the oppressed immigrants, the blacks, the female, and fiction. Perhaps this is why in the preface he wants us to read and react to the novel the same way as Scott Joplin intended players of the music to play it "Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast..." (Doctorow 1976, p. 9). To catch the original intention of the novel, one should digest it fully, bringing out what appear to be of lesser significance to the surface. Doctorow intends to highlight the intertextual relationship between his hypertext and the hypo text, but what is of major importance is that readers perceive the functionality of the hypo text at some major points that have been taken for granted.

The title also serves another hypo textual intention. The king of ragtime music, Scott Joplin, rose from unknown saloon piano player to renowned composer of ragtime music. However, his dream of gaining national recognition as an opera composer was blocked by publishers who refused to accept his work, labelling his music as 'Negro Music' (Boyer 2000, p.559). Hence even the title foreshadows the events of the novel, as history (Scott

Joplin's success and thwarted ambition) and story (Coalhouse Walker's story of success and downfall) finally coincide.

THE FERVOR OF PATRIOTISM

It is interesting that *Ragtime* begins with the narrator, describing the source of his father's income as follows: "the best part of Father's income was derived from the manufacture of flags and bunting and other accoutrements of patriotism, including fireworks. Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1990's (Doctorow 1976, p. 11). Zinn remarks that patriotism was always a means to drown class resentment. This was specifically the case with the early twentieth century:

... this year is going to be a year of patriotism and devotion to country. I am glad to know that people in every part of the country mean to be devoted to one flag, the glorious Stars and Stripes; that the people of this country mean to maintain the financial honor of the country as sacredly as they maintain the honor of the flag. (Zinn 1997, p.295)

From these very early pages, Doctorow establishes the atmosphere of the time. Yet considering the preface of the novel, we must perceive the intention behind this early reference to patriotism and the guarantee of financial prosperity it brought as belonging only to a certain group of people. What the novel does not directly mention but perhaps leaves as an intertextual referent for the reader to perceive is the brutality of the war on Cuba and the Philippines which had been going on before the novel's opening, thus undermining patriotism. From the very beginning, we can observe how the peritext (the title and the preface) helps to direct and control the reader's reception towards the less outspoken aspects of the progressive era. Even more significant is that Doctorow employs what has been stated in history books by historians, without commenting on any of the issues he highlights for the reader explicitly.

AMERICA AND RACIAL HOSTILITY

Doctorow touches upon matters of racism in the story of Coalhouse Walker, Sarah and their baby. The early twentieth century was a time of intense hatred toward coloured people, especially the blacks "in the years between 1889 and 1903, on the average, every week, two Negroes were lynched by mobs- hanged, burned, mutilated" (Zinn 1997, p.315).

Doctorow portrays Walker as a Negro who has managed to take advantage of this 'Progressive Era' by becoming rich, owning a car and in short, the very expression of the American myth of mounting *form rags to riches*. But he depicts the fakeness of this myth in American society, especially when it is experienced by a Negro. He portrays how such 'progress' could never be tolerated and cultivated in the culture of the time.

Doctorow's portrayal of the story of the Negro family, which finally leads to the death of both Walker and Sarah, is to draw attention to the hardships of the oppressed groups of American society, including Africa-Americans. The story of Walker represents what was happening to the Negroes at that time in the history of America. Though Walker manages to experience the myth of 'rags to riches', this does not change the attitude of American society toward an African- American, despite Walker's own expectation that he be treated differently now that he occupies a higher social status. Doctorow reflects the reactions to the incident as seen from the point of view of American society as totally unsympathetic:

It seemed like such a foolish thing to have happened. It seemed to be his fault, somehow, because he was Negro and it was the kind of problem that would only adhere to a Negro. His monumental negritude sat in front of them like a centrepiece on the table. While Sarah served, Father told her that her fiancé would have done better after all to drive away his car when he could and forget the matter. (Zinn 1997, p.140)

Doctorow parodies the history of America, when he gives statistics regarding the brutality towards the blacks and the poor, juxtaposing it besides the charity parties' people gave, supposedly intended to sympathise with the poor:

One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were burned alive. One hundred children were mutilated. Here seemed to be quotas for these things. There seemed to be quotas for death by starvation. Three were oil trusts and banking trusts and railroad trusts and beef trusts and steel trusts. It became fashionable to honor the poor. At places in New York people gave poverty balls. Guests came dressed in rags and ate from tin plates and drank from chipped mugs. Ballrooms were decorated to look like mines with beams, iron tracks and miner's lamps. Theatrical scenery firms were hired to make outdoor gardens look like dirt farms and dining rooms like cotton mills. Guests smoked cigar butts offered to them on silver trays... The proceeds were for charity. (Doctorow 1976, p.38)

This was progressivism for whites only, as Woodrow Wilson expressed little sympathy for African-Americans, sharing prevalent racist attitudes of his time (Tindall 2004, p.806). Doctorow demonstrates his criticism of American upper-class inability to comprehend or relate to the marginalized and lower-income families, his ironic tone inherent in the way he describes the poverty balls as 'fashionable', in other words, never really solving any major problems, nor reducing the casualty tolls he was listing a few lines above.

SUPRESSING REBELLIOUS ENERGIES

Doctorow also touches upon the historical notion that immigrants became naturalised citizens by being brought into the American two-party system, being invited to be loyal to that party, thus channelling and controlling their rebellious spirit (Zinn 1997, p.266). Tateh is an immigrant who is both culturally displaced and at odds with others of his kind. He leaves his wife once he realizes she has been offering herself to her boss for sake of money and leaves New Rochelle for a new life. The more he travels across the country the more he is disillusioned with the country:

In the morning he picked up a discarded newspaper. On the front page was an account of the police terror in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He found his cigarettes in their box in his pocket and smoked and read the paper. An editorial called for an investigation of the outrage by the Federal Government. So that was it, the strike would be won. But then what? He heard the clacking of the looms. A salary of six dollars and change. Would that transform their lives? They would still be in that wretched room, in that terrible dark street. Tateh shook his head. This country will not let me breathe." (Doctorow 1976, p. 100)

However, an incredibly dynamic character, Tateh learns how to adjust into the capitalist system of America by selling his art book. "Thus did the artist point his life along the lines of flow of American energy. Workers would strike and die but in the streets of cities an entrepreneur could cook sweet potatoes in a bucket of hot coals and sell them for a penny or two" (Doctorow 1976, p.102). To adjust himself totally within the Christian world of American capitalism, Tateh later marries Mother and hence establishes his social position within American Christian capitalist society.

CONCLUSION

Power requires the representation of subversion at some level in order to justify its own practice, so dissidence is always exposed only to be made safe and *Ragtime* reveals such dissidence. The novel has a direct bearing on the representation of power in American society, portraying how the face of power and authority is subverted by those under its oppressive force yet is ultimately controlled and suppressed by the ever present authority of the police and the militia. History and fiction also play significant roles in the novel as Doctorow makes fiction out of history and at the same time reveals the fiction out of which history is made.

Despite this oppression, there exist signs of rebellion and dissidence during the course of the story, threatening the authorities. Tateh takes part in a strike, demanding more wages. Coalhouse Walker takes power in his hand as he paralyzes the town of New Rochelle, insisting on having his Ford repaired to its primary state and having Willie Conklin handed over to him. However, these are only temporary dissident acts as they are oppressed by the violence of the police and the militia. They are everywhere present and will not permit complete takeover of power. They are violent in their reaction to the strikers, not allowing children to leave the city, afraid that 'the child crusade' might endanger their power by stirring public emotions "for the good of the country and the American democratic system they resolved there would be no more children's crusade" (Doctorow 1976, p.96). This violence on behalf of the police who are supposed to incorporate the feeling of security and peace among the public, is the very cause of rebellion and menace, the extreme instant of such being the attack upon Sarah as she approaches the authorities (Mr. Taft's Vice-President) with the hope of gaining help by confiding with him the case of her future husband, but is mistaken for an assassin and fatally injured.

Coalhouse Walker represents the new generation of Negroes who have progressed in their lives, have risen even higher in life than the whites, than the father or Willie Conklin who cannot tolerate his good manners, his being so well-dressed, and his economic status. His behaviour does not conform to what they conceive of how a Negro ought to behave. The two climatic points of the story are the car incident for Coalhouse and the strike for Tateh. The police will not conceive of Coalhouse's rights as a legal citizen and will pay no attention to his objections. Although he does take power in his hands, he is ultimately silenced and his life is destroyed. Hence his story opens with dissidence but ends with submission, typifying the conservative function of power and authority.

Tateh's case, although somewhat similar to Coalhouse, does leave some ray of hope. He comes to perceive the pointlessness of the strike as it will lead to no significant change. Although apparently the strikers win, and it is significant to note that the moment the strike begins, it is controlled by a team whose job is to organise strikes, a three cent increase in wages will not lead to the betterment of their lives. Tateh realizes this at an early stage. Yet amidst all this chaos, violence, and suppression, he survives.

Doctorow builds fiction out of history by locating the story within a particular historical context so that we are given the details of the historical events casually as the story proceeds. Historical figures such as Freud, Houdini, Stanford White, and Emma Goldman are woven into the plot of the story, and their stories often intermingle with the lives of the characters in the novel so realistically, that it becomes complicated at times to distinguish fiction from fact.

Doctorow challenges the reader to question the nature of historical truth. This is observed once we realise the intertextual relationship between the fictive world of his novel and the history of America as it is recorded and documented by historians. At first sight, it

appears that he is mainly depicting the spirit of the ‘Progressive Era’ in the lives of the three representative families. Yet further reading attests to his criticism of any notion of change and progress, especially in the lives of the marginalised and suppressed members of the American society. In other words, though we might hear voices of dissent, we can observe no instances of subversion. Coalhouse Walker is assassinated, Emma Goldman is deported, Tate is forced to sell his art and change his political position.

And since we have been regarding the novel from the point of view of Genette’s open structuralist intertextuality, we can finally observe that as a *parole*, *Ragtime* is an instance of the *langue* or *system* which has structured American society from the very start of the country’s formation by its Founding Fathers, constructing the foundations of American mentality and way of life.

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